

School dances and cigarette burns by lufthexe

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Summary:

Joyce leans against the faded wood next to him and fishes for a cig in her back pocket. By the time she's pulled one out he's already offering her his lighter, her brows quirking up as she leans forward and lets him light the end. As if she hasn't been lighting her own cigarettes since she was thirteen; as if she didn't let him take his first few puffs off her last camel a year ago. It seems as though the past year has given Hopper a confidence he didn't have before. She can't tell yet if it's a good or bad thing.

1. Chapter 1

It's cold; late November, and the chill in the air is enough to numb her fingers as she takes another drag of her cigarette, the smoke of exhale mixed with the heat of her breath condensing in the cool air. She knows she should go inside; the threadbare flannel shirt she has on is hardly enough to ward off the brisk winds that whip around the house intermittently. And yet, she can't bring herself to reenter that house, not when she can still hear the occasional shout from her father, equally impassioned replies from her step-mother rattling through the windows.

It's enough to make her brave the chill of late November, when it's the only relief she's got. School's out till Monday, and there's no point walking three miles to sit on bone-cold bleachers just to escape the yelling. She'd end up back here, anyways.

It's going to be a long winter.

By Monday Joyce has developed a cough, no helping it really. The cold November air was unforgiving, and despite the windbreaker she'd found to help, it's not the same as being inside a warm house.

Not that her house was ever warm. No one could be accused of calling the old Brenner trailer 'warm'.

When she escapes seventh period to go light up behind the old utility shed, she's surprised to find someone already squatting in the patchy snow, though no tell-tale puff of smoke drifts from the lonely figure. It's not a teacher, though, so Joyce barely nods before sitting down next to them, a stray camel pulled from the pocket inside her jacket as her beaten-up zippo flicks open.

It's not until a few breaths have passed that the boy looks over, maybe curious. Joyce doesn't quite recognize him; maybe she's seen him in the hallway? Underclassmen all look the same, anyways. But he turns to her more fully, and she can see the full shape of his face, the dark shadow under his left eye and bruise that looks just as fresh as the blood on the back of his hand.

She must have winced in sympathy, because his eyes flick to hers instantly, daring her to comment. But Joyce had seen her fair share of black eyes to know that mostly, they just need to be ignored. She digs in her jacket before realizing this was indeed her last cigarette until she could nab a few more from the kitchen drawer, and offers it to her silent companion.

It's a moment before he reacts, and when he finally takes a drag of the cig, it's with a cough and a splutter. Her mouth quirks up despite herself; here she is, skipping class, corrupting this underclassman who hasn't even had his first cigarette, probably hasn't even had his first taste of whiskey yet. He looks a bit sheepish as he passes it back, and Joyce can't help but grin at the kid, pulling her knees up to her chest as she takes another drag. "So, did you piss off Mr. Helzborn, or what?" she asks, and he tenses slightly at the comment, but doesn't turn away.

He looks down for a moment before replying. "I got into it with Pierce Andrews."

She'd laugh at his stupidity if he didn't already have a black eye for his troubles; as it was, she smothers a chuckle with a long drag and exhale. Pierce was her year, and bigger than most. Meaner, too, if rumor served true, not that she had any reason to interact with him. One of those ROTC brats who thought they were already four-star generals, but this one had the muscles to back it.

Joyce fishes out a tissue, offering it with a "well, here, then," to the boy who's nose looks like it might start bleeding again at any moment.

"I'm James," he says, and it takes her a minute before she thinks to respond.

"Joyce," she replies, knowing the minute she said her name he'd know she was Brenner's kid, and the flicker of pity, if not disgust, would show up in his eyes. But he just nods, accepting the proffered kleenex.

He's odd, she thinks, but she doesn't quite mind.

It's nearly a year before she sees him again, and now he goes by Jim, with the hint of stubble on his chin and more than a few inches on her. It catches her off guard, to see that odd kid with a black eye walking down the halls with Kelly Edmonds, a pretty blonde cheerleader that definitely wouldn't have looked at him twice a year ago. He nods at her as they pass in the hallway, and Joyce has no response except to raise her eyebrows. He was a jock now, it seemed, with girlfriend and the looks to boot. There was no reason to associate with someone who worked at the mini-mart after school just to pay for gas and cigs.

But she seems to see him more often, now, half the time with Kelly, the other half with some guy from the football team. He must be looking for more bruises if he's looking to join the team, she thinks, but somehow it suits him. The smoking, however, does not, and the first time she catches him behind the utility shed blowing smoke she can't help but laugh, startling him as she leans against the faded wood next to him and fishes for a cig in her back pocket. By the time she's pulled one out he's already offering her his lighter, her brows quirking up as she leans forward and lets him light the end. As if she hasn't been lighting her own cigarettes since she was thirteen; as if she didn't let him take his first few puffs off her last camel a year ago. It seems as though the past year has given him a confidence he didn't have before. She can't tell yet if it's a good or bad thing.

"You come here often?" He quips, and she's laughing despite herself. She flicks her ashes at him as retribution, rolling her eyes as he dodges around them, grinning all the while.

"So, football team, huh?" she asks once they've both settled back against the tiny shed again, digging holes into the dirt with the heel of her boot. She looks up questioningly, and he just shrugs, leaning farther back.

"Seemed like a good way not to get beaten up," he replies, and it's more than true, though the growth spurt gives him an edge that not many in the school can beat.

"I'm sure the cheerleader girlfriend doesn't hurt too bad, either," she

shoots back, perhaps a bit sharper than she intends, because his eyebrows are up as he turns to her more fully.

"Kelly and I aren't...wait, are you jealous?" he asks, and now he's grinning, as if he's got the upper hand in this conversation finally.

She nearly doubles over laughing.

He clearly wasn't expecting that reaction, because his arms cross defensively, looking a bit indignant as she takes another drag of her cigarette, her face still cracking at the thought.

"Really, Hopper?" she's still chuckling as she responds; he huffs, his jaw tight. She pats his shoulder in an attempt at comfort, but she can tell his indignation is just for show. Maybe the football team hasn't ruined him just yet. She watches the clouds as they talk, lazy wisps of white stagnant in the August sun as he talks about the upcoming football season.

"You should come to a game," he's saying, and she finds it hard to believe he can't see the irony in asking perhaps the least school-spirited student to attend.

"What, afraid you won't have anyone to cheer for you?" she responds, knowing she's gotta work at the mini-mart Friday night. She always works the weekend shifts; it's after school, and nobody else wants it. Plus, she gets to escape the house for a little while. She almost regrets not being able to go, though, if only for the chance to tease him about his uniform, in garish orange and white, nearly as bad as the Tiger mascot that prances around the field and in the gymnasium during spirit days.

He shakes his head, but he's smiling as he finishes his cigarette, crushing the butt beneath the toe of his boot. "I'll see you there, then," he challenges, and Joyce rolls her eyes as he disappears around the backside of the shed, heading towards the practice field.

2. Chapter 2

It's three weeks before she can go to a game, not that she's been trying. Morbid curiosity, she thinks, as she pulls off her name tag, shoving it in her pocket as she heads to the school. She could stop home beforehand, actually try to find a shirt that doesn't smell like slightly burned coffee and two day-old hot dogs. But Friday nights are hit and miss with her father; he could be out at the bar, the trailer blessedly quiet, or he could be three sheets to the wind, and more than ready for a fight.

So it's in her sad-looking uniform that she sneaks into the football field, well past kickoff so no one's bothering to take tickets. She lights up underneath the bleachers, standing near the edge to see the field. It's a little past halftime, and they're losing terribly, as usual. Rare was the year of a championship team, though once in a while there'd be a star player who got swept up with offers to play for the city school before helping change their losing streak that dramatically.

It's hard to spot him on the field at first; they all look the same with shoulder pads and helmets. But when they come in for a huddle, she can see him, '22' emblazoned on his back as he focuses on the play.

God, she'd tease him about this later.

She moved a little closer from behind the bleachers, watching as they set up for a play. She'd be surprised he was already in the lineup his sophomore year if he wasn't one of the tallest students on the team. Just as they set into position, Joyce felt a tap on her shoulder, startling her out of an unintentional interest on her part. Turning, she eyed up the stranger who was asking to bum a cigarette. She had half a mind to turn him down; the mini-mart only paid \$1.15 an hour, and a pack of cigs were nearly 75 cents a pop. But his smirk was damn near a challenge. "Unless you're too into the football game, that is," he counters. She scoffed in reply, digging another smoke out of her pocket.

She would have ignored him, had he not clearly been an upperclassman; a cocky grin and clear disinterest in high school athletics marked him for the group that smoke, drank, and came from

the wrong side of the tracks.

Her people.

Just then a cheer went up in the crowd, and Joyce fought the urge to turn, trying to maintain her apathetic demeanor.

"You got a name, doll?" he asked, and for some reason Joyce was replying before she had even thought to answer.

"Joyce," she replies, eyeing him up. He's probably a drop-out, as she's never seen him around school before.

Or maybe he spends too much time cutting class to be recognizable. Either way, his leather jacket and arrogant grin should be more than enough to warn her away from him.

But then again, she's never been the type to shy away from danger. At least, in theory. Living with an alcoholic father may have hardened her in some ways, but it didn't mean she was trying to make the same mistakes her mother made.

She can tell he's eyeing her up, and while the attention does make her fluster, she does her best to hide it. She had come to the game for a reason, after all.

"Sorry, er..."

"Lonnie," he quickly interjects, raising an eyebrow and waiting for her to continue.

"Yeah, right, sorry Lonnie, but I did actually want to watch some of this terrible game so I can harass one of my friends about it later. He seems to think we'll win this year."

Lonnie lets out a laugh, and Joyce finds herself smiling along. She's not uneasy, per se, just uncomfortable; sitting on the bleachers with the rest of the school seemed less daunting than trying to hold a semi-intelligent conversation with a drop-out who eyed her the same way he had looked at her pack of cigs.

He nodded, and Joyce turned to leave, almost hesitating before another cry went up from the crowd, and she had a perfect

opportunity to slip in to the masses unnoticed. It was much easier to focus on the game, the garish school colors being proudly displayed despite their current 8-24 score.

And when Jim turned to the stands and caught her eye, well, she could almost say it was worth coming to the game.